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ABSTRACT

This teaching model, involving character analysis in literature, illustrates effective instruction that engages students in an interpretive problem, helps them make complex interpretations, and enables them to transform their conclusions into effective literary analysis. The introductory activity in the model is a discussion of a student opinionnaire which uses opinions to create interest in a work of literature and helps with problems students will encounter in trying to interpret character. Next is small group work and ensuing class discussion based on a character questionnaire which gives students practice in making inferences about a character, gathering and selecting evidence, and explaining how evidence supports a conclusion about a major character. This is followed by an activity sheet in which students must consider and weigh many possibilities as they rank an extensive list of values and argue their positions to reach a consensus with respect to a particular character's values in a group discussion. The follow-up assignment asks students to do in writing exactly what they have done orally in discussing the character. Appendixes include student activity sheets, opinionnaires and questionnaires, and a sample student essay. (KEH)

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TEACHING STRATEGIES FOR INTERPRETING AND WRITING ABOUT LITERATURE

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Teaching Strategies for Interpreting

and Writing About Literature

Larry R. Johannessen

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In his best selling book, *Cultural Literacy*, E. D. Hirsch states that reading is a complicated process. He notes,

> The new picture that is emerging from language research is more complicated and more useful. It brings to the fore the highly active mind of the reader, who is now discovered to be not only a decoder of what is written down but also a supplier of much essential information that is not written down. The reader's mind is constantly inferring meanings that are not directly stated by the words of the text but are nonetheless part of its essential content. The explicit meanings of a piece of writing are the tip of the iceberg of meaning; the larger part lies below the surface of the text and is composed of the reader's own relevant knowledge. (1987, 33-34)

Hirsch's solution to helping students learn how to read beyond "the tip of the iceberg" and dig into its bulk is to have them become acquainted with his 63-page list of people, places, terms, texts, and events. Presumably,

memorizing the meanings of items such as *irony*, *symbol*, *parody*, *Brutus*, *Mark Antony*, *Julius Caesar*, and *King Lear*, just to name a few, provides students with the relevant background knowledge to interpret complex texts and become literate Americans.

In a recent article in *English Journal*, Michael Smith and George Hillocks (1988) argue that while background information is important, depth of understanding is also a critical factor in interpreting literature and something Hirsch neglects in arguing on behalf of breadth (45). Clearly, having students memorize Hirsch's list of items or similar lists of literary terms which dominate most secondary literature texts will not go far in helping students learn how to interpret literature.

If Smith and Hillocks are correct, then the question becomes how can we set up instruction so that it will provide students with the depth of understanding that will enable them to interpret and write about literature. For, I think, most of us here today recognize that if students have difficulty interpreting literature, and most of them do, then they have even more difficulty when they are asked to turn their interpretations into written compositions.

Smith and Hillocks cite research which suggests that when students are given extended practice with what they call "conceptual knowledge," their ability to understand new texts increases dramatically (46 and 48). I would extend their argument and suggest that when students are given extended practice dealing with a particular interpretive problem and that practice includes knowledge of how to turn their interpretations into analytical compositions, their

ability to interpret new texts and write effectively about their interpretations increases drámatically.

The sequence of activities involving character analysis I will now show you is one example of how to set up instruction that engages students in an interpretive problem, helps them make complex interpretations, and enables them to transform their conclusions into effective literary analysis.

Student Opinionnaire

One way to help students with problems they will encounter in trying to interpret character is to use an introductory activity. If you'll turn to the first page of your handout (Appendix, page 13), you will find an example of one type of introductory activity, a student opinionnaire (Kahn, Walter, and Johannessen 1984, 25). This particular opinionnaire is designed to be used with Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*. The opinionnaire is based on a simple idea. Students have opinions about various subjects; it uses those opinions to create interest in a work of literature and helps with problems students will encounter in trying to interpret character. In this case, it is keyed to issues in the play and two main characters, Brutus and Mark Antony.

The first step in using the opinionnaire is to hand it out to the class perhaps the day before they start reading. Have students mark whether they agree or disagree with each of the ten statements. Then, lead a class discussion focusing on each statement, and encourage students to express their opinions and challenge the views of others. Most often, a lively discussion ensues.

Once students have discussed all the statements, point out that they deal with aspects of major characters in the play and that they should keep them in mind as they read. In fact, statement #3, "If a political leader has done something wrong, it is all right to get rid of him or her by whatever means necessary," is keyed to the character of Brutus and his killing of Caesar for the good of Rome. In a like manner, statement #4, "Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely," is related to Mark Antony's desire for power. In later discussions on the play, you can refer back to how students responded on the opinionnaire and compare their responses to what they actually find in their reading.

This activity links student attitudes and opinions to the ideas and characters in the play. It provides a context--a place to start--for understanding the characters, their actions and their motivations.

"What If" Character Questionnaire

The purpose of the "What If Brutus?" Character Questionnaire (Kahn, Walter, and Johannessen, 29) which is on the next page of your handout (Appendix, pages 14-15) is to give students practice in making inferences about a character, gathering and selecting evidence, and explaining how evidence supports a conclusion about a major character. In other words, in this activity students practice orally the skills involved in analyzing and writing about a character in a literary work.

Don't let the format of the activity, that of multiple-choice questions, deceive you. It is not a test. Rather, the questions are designed to focus on a single character and take the character out of the context of the play and put

him or her in new situations. The catch is, as the directions state, students must use evidence from the text to support their interpretations.

The questionnaire is best used when students have finished or are nearly finished reading the play. Have students complete it on the basis of their understanding of the character. Then, divide the class into small groups and have them try to reach a consensus on their answers. This will usually not be a simple task since the multiple-choice questions are not designed in a typical fashion. No *one* answer *is* the correct answer for a given question. For most questions, several of the possible answers might be reasonably defended. They are deliberately designed in this manner to create disagreement so that students actively engage in making inferences, gathering and selecting evidence, and explaining evidence as they argue their choices.

For example, question #3 usually creates considerable debate. Some students argue that Brutus would try to talk them into running a better candidate, citing his honesty about his own shortcomings and his statements about Caesar's many leadership qualities. Others argue that he would refuse to run for president for the same reason and because he would say others could lead the country much better than he could. Still others say that he is so easily manipulated by others like Mark Antony that he would end up making deals to ensure that he won the election which unfortunately would lead to his downfall.

At the conclusion of the small group discussion, have the students reconvene as an entire class. As they discuss each question, disagreements often arise; as they debate back and forth, let them draw conclusions based on evidence from the play. One of the strengths of this activity is that the questions

take students outside the experience of the play, and they are encouraged to explore, defend, and elaborate their unique ideas. In addition, for many students the characters come alive as they make connections between characters in the play and historical figures named in various questions.

Literary Characters' Values Profile

The next activity is designed to help students analyze a character's values. In your handout you will find a sheet labelled "Character Analysis" (Appendix, page 16). One of the things I want to illustrate here is that the activity can be done with almost any major character in any work of literature. However, to help you understand how the activity works, I am going to use as an example, Ernest Haycox's short story, "A Question of Blood."

As you can see from the sheet, this activity gives students a list of 22 values that they must rank for a particular character. They rank the character's most important and least important values early in a work and at or near the end. Making these rankings requires students to make complex inferences. They must consider and weigh many possibilities. In making their choices and later arguing with peers, students practice supporting and explaining their conclusions with evidence from the story.

When you hand this out to students, you will probably have to go over and define difficult terms such as *aesthetics* and *altruism*. Then, have students rank the character's values.

After they have completed their individual rankings, put students in small groups and have them try to reach a consensus. As students discuss their rankings in small groups, they make some interesting discoveries about Frank

Isabel, the main character in "A Question of Blood." For example, some students rank "autonomy" as one of Isabel's top three values in the beginning of the story because one of the reasons he moved to the Yellow Hills was the freedom and opportunity there. They also may put "acceptance" as one of his least important values because he did not care about what others thought of the way he lived.

However, when they rank his values at the end of the story, after Isabel has turned against his Indian wife, students sometimes put "acceptance" as one of his most important values and "autonomy" as one of his least important values. In other words, students begin to see how a character changes as a result of his experiences.

Of course other students suggest different values and debate ensues. In discussing their rankings students find specific and concrete ways to talk about the actions and motives of a character, and they are practicing making and supporting conclusions. As students debate possible values, they reach a fuller understanding of the character.

After reaching a consensus in their small groups, have students debate their ideas in a whole class discussion. As the groups compare answers and discuss how and why a character's values change or do not change, the discussion is at a high level because of their previous work. Students have progressed from making their own decisions independently to refining those ideas and challenging others in small groups and finally to debating their conclusions with the whole class.

I think you can also see how you can use this activity for other characters, such as Brutus and Mark Antony, in longer works. (Mark Antony = "power," "wealth," and "justice"; Brutus = "altruism," "morality," and "honesty.") With longer works, I sometimes have students do the activity once they have read enough to determine each major character's values early in the work. Then, when they have finished reading, they do the activity for each character's values at or near the end.

Analyzing Values

The next page of your handout (Appendix, page 17) illustrates the versatility of this activity. It can easily be modified to work with short poems that involve character development, such as "Peter at Fourteen" by Constance Carrier. Notice that the "Analyzing Values" sheet asks students to rank the character's top and bottom *two* values, instead of *three*, as predicted by the narrator of the poem.

What is most exciting about doing this activity with poetry is seeing students enthusiastically discussing their interpretations and conclusions, something which is somewhat of a rarity when it comes to poetry.

Note also the follow-up writing assignment at the bottom of the sheet. Here is an example of how this activity guides students in analyzing a character and in turning their conclusions into a written composition. The assignment asks students to do exactly what they have done orally in discussing the character in small group and whole class discussions.

Composition Planning Sheet

Once students have practiced analyzing characters in activities like the ones I have shown you, they should be ready at this point for an independent activity in which they must apply the skills they have learned in previous activities.

The next two pages of your handout (Appendix, pages 18-19) contain a "Composition Planning Sheet" which is designed to be used with the short story "After the Ball" by Sally Benson. Have students read the story, and then pass out the "Planning Sheet." The directions ask students to write a composition in which they explain how the main character's values change and why. It suggests how their thesis might focus on her top value at the beginning of the story, her top value at the end, and the reasons for the change in values.

Note that the planning sheet asks students to do the character analysis for Norma Martin in the same manner they have done for other characters in previous activities. The only difference is that now they must do it on their own.

After determining Norma Martin's values, students fill out the planning sheet. Besides finding evidence and providing reasoning to support their analysis of the character's values, they use the back side of the sheet to present evidence and reasoning for the causes of the change in values.

Once students have completed the sheet, have them write their compositions, or if you think they need a bit more help, you might have them meet in small groups to critique planning sheets before they write their papers.

In this activity students are applying in an independent writing situation the analytical and writing strategies that have been the focus of the sequence of activities.

"That Awkward Age"--Student Essay

The next page of your handout (Appendix, pages 20-21) contains a paper written by an eleventh grade average student on "After the Ball." While I don't have time to go over the student essay with you now, please take a look at it on your own. The essay shows a sophisticated analysis of the main character, an effective use of evidence and explanation of evidence to support the student's viewpoint. In short, this student essay illustrates how using a sequence of activities like I have shown you here today can provide students with the extended practice that Smith and Hillocks say is necessary if students are to have the "in-depth knowledge of concepts...and discourse conventions" that will enable them "to mature as readers" (48) and, as I argue, as writers.

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APPENDIX

STUDENT ACTIVITY SHEETS

Politics, Patriotism, and Protest Opinionnaire

In the space provided mark whether you agree or disagree with each statement.

		Agree or Disagree
1.	It is never right to kill another person.	_____
2.	Political leaders usually act in the best interest of their countries.	_____
3.	If a political leader has done something wrong, it is all right to get rid of him or her by whatever means necessary.	_____
4.	"Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely."	_____
5.	In certain situations it may be justified for a political leader to bend or break the law for the good of the country.	_____
6.	People should never compromise their ideals or beliefs.	_____
7.	"My country right or wrong" is not just a slogan; it is every citizens' patriotic duty.	_____
8.	No cause, political or otherwise, is worth dying for.	_____
9.	"Cowards die many times before their deaths; the valiant taste of death but once."	_____
10.	"The evil that men do lives after them; the good, is [often buried] with their bones."	_____

From Kahn, Elizabeth A., Carolyn Calhoun Walter, and Larry R. Johannessen. *Writing About Literature*, Urbana, Ill.: ERIC/NCTE, 1984, 25.

What If Brutus...?

Read each of the following statements and circle the letter that best completes the statement in terms of what you think would fit the character of Brutus. Be prepared to defend your answers with reasoning based on evidence from the play.

1. If Brutus had been a general in Adolf Hitler's Secret Service, he would have

   A. waited until the right opportunity and then shot Hitler.
   B. hired someone to assassinate Hitler.
   C. worked to overthrow Hitler.
   D. praised Hitler.

2. If Brutus were at a baseball game, he would

   A. be a pitcher.
   B. be an umpire.
   C. sit quietly and enjoy the game.
   D. sit near the opposing team's dugout and harass players, coaches, and umpires.

3. If people started a campaign today to elect Brutus president, he would

   A. pretend that he didn't want to run.
   B. try to talk them into running a better candidate.
   C. make deals with other political leaders to make sure that he won the election.
   D. refuse to run.

4. Today if Brutus were at a large family picnic, he would most likely

   A. go off by himself, sit under a tree, and read a book.
   B. organize and participate in contests and games.
   C. stand around and sulk until someone asked him to participate in the activities.
   D. have long talks with anyone who might give the family a bad name.

5. Brutus would most admire.

   A. George Washington.
   B. General George Patton.
   C. Jack the Ripper.
   D. the Beatles.

6. In school Brutus's favorite course would be

   A. philosophy.
   B. English.
   C. political science.
   D. speech.

7. If Brutus were alive today, he would most likely live

   A. in a mansion.
   B. in a monastery.
   C. in an apartment.
   D. on a farm.

8. Brutus would probably most enjoy a social gathering of

   A. close friends.
   B. family.
   C. Hollywood film stars.
   D. college professors.

9. Today, Brutus's favorite hobby would most likely be

   A. listening to music.
   B. playing cards.
   C. travel.
   D. reading.

10. If Brutus were alive today, his job or profession would probably be

    A. computer programmer.
    B. used car salesman.
    C. sports announcer.
    D. lawyer or judge.

11. Brutus's favorite type of television program would be

    A. detective show.
    B. soap opera.
    C. game show.
    D. situation comedy.

From Kahn, Elizabeth A., Carolyn Calhoun Walter, and Larry R. Johannessen. *Writing About Literature*, Urbana, Ill.: ERIC/NCTE, 1984, 29.

Character Analysis

VALUES:

1. Acceptance (Approval from others)
2. Achievement
3. Aesthetics
4. Altruism
5. Autonomy
6. Companionship (Friendship)
7. Creativity
8. Health
9. Honesty
10. Justice
11. Knowledge
12. Love
13. Loyalty
14. Morality
15. Physical Appearance
16. Pleasure
17. Power
18. Recognition
19. Religious Faith
20. Self-respect
21. Skill
22. Wealth

Character Analyzed _____

	Character's Values Early in the Work	If the character changes, Values Near the End
What does the character value *most*? List his/her top three values *in order*.	1. _____	1. _____
	2. _____	2. _____
	3. _____	3. _____
What does the character value *least*? List his/her bottom three values *in order*.	20. _____	20. _____
	21. _____	21. _____
	22. _____	22. _____

Be prepared to present **reasons** and **evidence** for your choices.

Adapted from Kahn, Elizabeth A., Carolyn Calhoun Walter, and Larry R. Johannessen. *Writing About Literature*, Urbana, Ill.: ERIC/NCTE, 1984, pp. 28-32.

Analyzing Values

VALUES:

1. Acceptance (Approval from others)
2. Achievement
3. Aesthetics
4. Altruism
5. Autonomy
6. Companionship (Friendship)
7. Creativity
8. Health
9. Honesty
10. Justice
11. Knowledge
12. Love
13. Loyalty
14. Morality
15. Physical Appearance
16. Pleasure
17. Power
18. Recognition
19. Religious Faith
20. Self-respect
21. Skill
22. Wealth

"Peter at Fourteen"

After you have read "Peter at Fourteen," refer to the list of values above and any additional terms that you wish to use to complete the following.

	Peter's Current Values (at 14) (according to the narrator)	Peter's Future Values (as predicted by narrator)
What does the character value *most*? List his top two values *in order*.	1. _____	1. _____
	2. _____	2. _____
What does the character value *least*? List his bottom two values *in order*.	21. _____	21. _____
	22. _____	22. _____

Write a brief composition in which you explain what, according to the narrator, Peter's most important and least important values are currently (at 14) and what they are predicted to be in the future. Present reasons and evidence for your choices and explain the reason(s) for the change(s) in Peter's values.

Adapted from Kahn, Elizabeth A., Carolyn Calhoun Walter, and Larry R. Johannessen. *Writing About Literature*, Urbana, Ill.: ERIC/NCTE, 1984, pp. 28-32.

Composition Planning Sheet

Assignment: Read "After the Ball" by Sally Benson and write a composition in which you explain how Norma Martin's values change and why. Your thesis statement might explain what she values most at the beginning, what she values most at the end, and the reason(s) for the change in values.

Sample Thesis
At the beginning of "A Question of Blood," Frank Isabel values autonomy, but after "civilization" comes to the Yellow Hills, he is more concerned about acceptance by others.

Before attempting to formulate a thesis, fill out the "Character Analysis" for Norma's values.

THESIS:

_____

_____

_____

List **specific** evidence for Norma Martin's top value at the beginning.

EVIDENCE	EXPLANATION of how the evidence supports the thesis

List **specific** evidence for Norma Martin's top value at or near the end.

EVIDENCE	EXPLANATION of how the evidence supports the thesis

Explain what **causes** this change in values and list supporting **evidence**.

That Awkward Age

"After the Ball," by Sally Benson is a story about a young girl who does some growing up as a result of her attempts to be accepted by an older crowd of people. At the beginning of the story, Norma Martin values acceptance above all else, but after "the crowd" discovers how old she is, she is most concerned with honesty.

At the start of the story, Norma Martin values acceptance from the older crowd at The Breakers. In order to be accepted by the older crowd, Norma worried about her physical appearance. She knew that if she was going to pass for eighteen she had to look eighteen. Norma's mother noticed Norma changing: "She began to fuss over her appearance, spending hours in the tub, hours over her nails, hours pressing her clothes and getting dressed" (Benson 46). Suddenly, every aspect of Norma's appearance had to be perfect. Once when her mother picked a dress out of the closet Norma stated, "It's too sweet. It makes me look twelve..." (Benson 47). Norma felt that if she looked like the rest of the crowd they would accept her as a member of their group; therefore, she refused to wear anything that she thought made her look younger and she would "fuss over her appearance" in the belief that it would make her look older.

That acceptance is most important to Norma can be seen in other ways as well. For example, Norma felt that if you were not a part of the older crowd, you were an absolute nothing and had nothing to live for. She told her mother,

> There are two sets, not counting the actual babies. There are the kids, 14 or 15, and then there's the older crowd. And if you go around with the kids you're absolutely cooked with the older crowd. You might as well be dead. (Benson 46)

Norma even risked her friendship with one of her best friends, Annie. "Annie was nice, Norma thought, but Annie was 15. When you were 15, you were as good as dead" (Benson 48). She considered dropping Annie because Annie was no longer old enough for her new "crowd."

If friendship meant nothing to Norma, honesty meant even less. Lying got Norma accepted. No one could have guessed her age seeing her drive around town in the cream colored convertible coupe. She had her driver's license and as far as anyone could tell, she was eighteen. Her mother was puzzled when Norma came home from the beach "white and tearful." She confronted Norma and asked,

> "Do you mean to tell me no one knew how old you are?"
>
> "Of course not! You don't think for one minute that Bill or any of them would have paid any attention to me for one minute if they'd known I was sixteen, do you? They thought I was eighteen. I sort of let them think I was." (Benson 48-49)

She did not think twice about lying just as long as she was accepted by the crowd. Later, her lying would get her in trouble, too!

At the end of the story, Norma values honesty rather than acceptance. For example, after Norma had been stood up by Bill, Mrs. Martin notices that "she is no longer busy with nail polish and cold cream... . The banner of her lovely youth pulled down as though she wished to hide it" (Benson 51). Norma is no longer concerned about her physical appearance. She realizes that it was the makeup and the clothes which made her seem older and made that crowd like her when actually what she really wanted was the crowd to accept her as herself. Norma also realized that her "kid" friends are very important to her. Instead of getting ready to go out with the crowd one evening, Norma says to her mother:

> "I'm going to sit up a while. I'm going to write some letters. I'm going to write to Annie." ...
>
> "I was thinking," (Mrs. Martin) said, "that we might hire a sailboat tomorrow and ask that little Jerry to go with us. Or, maybe you two would rather go alone."
>
> "Mmm, that would be swell," Norma said. (Benson 51)

Norma realizes that her friends and not "the crowd" are more important to her now. It seemed to be a life or death situation in the beginning to be accepted by "the crowd," but now her "real" friends are what she considers important.

That honesty is Norma's most important value at the end of the story can be most clearly seen in the very last scene. Bill James, one of the "in crowd," shows up at their cottage at midnight. He says he has come to take Norma to the ball. Norma sends him away. Then, she goes to her mother's room and sticks her head in the door:

> "Did you hear that?" asked Norma. "Coming around this time of night. Who does he think he is? What does he think I am?"
>
> She smiled suddenly and gaily at her mother. (Benson 52)

Norma could have just as easily given in to Bill and gone to the ball, but instead she is being honest with herself by not letting Bill take advantage of her feelings and she is letting him go. The boy who was once so important to her is now a pest.

While it could be argued that Norma becomes increasingly disappointed with "the crowd" as she learns more and more about them and discovers that they really are not as great as she thought they were, there is one incident more than any other than seems to have influenced Norma's change in values. The incident is when the crowd finds out how old she really is. After the older crowd finds Norma's driver's license and discover how old she really is: young and immature. When Norma's mother finds out that no one knew Norma's real age, Norma explains,

> "You don't think for one minute that Bill or any of them would have paid any attention to me for one minute if they'd know I was sixteen, do you? They thought I was about eighteen. I sort of let them think I was." (Benson 48-49)

Here Norma admits that she lied in order to be accepted. This is the first time that she has been openly honest about her former actions.

However, being honest with herself is only the first step for Norma. She also needs to be honest with others and prove to herself that she respects herself. She takes this final step on the night of the ball, around midnight, when Bill James comes to get Norma:

> "Hop into your things," he said.
>
> Then Norma's voice came to her, cool and fresh. "I couldn't, not possibly. It's late." (Benson 52)

Norma's honesty shines through in this entire scene. She shows Bill that he can not order her around or expect her to jump when he says so. In addition, she is finally saying to him what she has thought for quite some time. Then, the two of them begin talking about the rest of "the crowd," especially one of the ladies who sings old songs all the time. When Bill comments that this lady is "all right," Norma replies, "Frankly, she bores me" (Benson 52). This shows that Norma is finally being honest with herself and expressing her feelings to Bill. With this step in her transformation complete, Norma sends him away.

In the beginning of the story, being accepted by "the crowd" was extremely important to Norma. However, after this group finds out how old she really is, Norma begins to realize that these people were not her friends but merely a show. Near the end of the story, when Norma goes to the movie with her mother, she feels perfectly fine not being around all the "friends" or Bill. Norma said, "Oh, I'm not going to sit here and wait for him to stop by every night..." (Benson 51). She realizes that she can not be something she is not and who her friends really are. She realizes that honesty is more important than being accepted by others.